

Remarks at the Families USA Health Action 2011 Conference

January 28, 2011

Thank you. Everybody, please have a seat. Thank you. Thank you, Ron, for not only the generous introduction, but for the wonderful leadership and for sharing some of your applause with me. *[Laughter]* To Phil and Kate Villers, for founding Families USA, we thank them. Thank you. To all of you, organizers and advocates and activists, all of you who believe that change does not come from the top down, it comes from the bottom up, and you guys activated the country—thank you so much for your great work.

On Tuesday, I gave this little speech here in town—*[laughter]*—the State of the Union. I outlined my vision for an America that's more determined, more competitive, better positioned for the future. An America where we out-innovate, we out-educate, we outbuild the rest of the world, where we take responsibility for our deficits, where we reform our Government to meet the demands of a new age.

That's what will be required for the new jobs and new businesses of the 21st century to set up shop here in the United States. That's how our people will prosper within our communities. That's how America will remain a place where each of us is free to choose our own destiny and make of our lives what we will.

Now, for most families, that freedom requires a job that pays the bills, covers your mortgage, helps you look after your children. It means a chance to send those children to college, save enough for retirement. And it means access to quality, affordable health care. That is part of the American Dream.

That security is part of the American Dream. And that's what brought me here, to this conference, 4 years ago this week. I looked younger then. *[Laughter]* I didn't have as much gray hair. *[Laughter]*

Even before the pangs of this historic recession that we've just gone through—so 4 years ago, that was still on the horizon—our friends and neighbors were already dealing with the anxiety and the cruelty of a health care system that just did not work for too many American citizens.

We believed we could change that. We believed that we could finally guarantee quality, affordable care for every American. And even though I hadn't announced my candidacy for this office, I joined you that day in a promise, that we would make health reform a reality by the end of the next President's first term. That was our commitment.

That was our commitment, and together, that is what we did. That is what you did. So thank you for all those years of work to help make it happen. I couldn't be prouder of you.

Now, since I signed the Affordable Care Act into law 10 months ago, Americans already have more power, greater freedom, stronger control of their health care. This law will lower premiums. It is limiting costs. It is reining in the worst abuses of the insurance industry with some of the toughest consumer protections this country has ever known. This is making a real difference for families across this country as we speak.

Now, it's no secret that not everyone in Congress agrees with this law. *[Laughter]* And as I said on Tuesday, I believe that anything can be improved. As we work to implement it, there

are going to be times where we say, you know what, this needs a tweak, this isn't working exactly as intended, exactly the way we want. Here's a way of doing it smarter, better. We may be able to serve families to lower costs and improve care every more.

And so I'm willing to work with anyone, Republican or Democrat, to make care better or to make their health care more affordable. I've even suggested we begin by correcting what was a legitimate concern: a flaw in the legislation that placed unnecessary bookkeeping burdens on small businesses. I'm open to other ideas, including patient safety innovations and medical malpractice reform.

But here's what I'm not open to, and I said this on Tuesday. I am not willing to just refight the battles of the last 2 years. I'm not open to efforts that will take this law apart without considering the lives and the livelihoods that hang in the balance. Families USA, we are moving forward. We are moving forward.

Already, small-business owners are taking advantage of the new health care tax credit that can offset as much as 35 percent of the cost of covering their employees.

We've got small-business owners like Janine Vaughn of Spokane, Washington. Janine always tried to do the right thing and cover her workers. But she explained, "We're a small business. We care about everybody who works here." But over the last 12 years, her premiums have tripled, so that was eating away at her profit margin.

But today, that new tax credit that was part of the Affordable Care Act is helping her cover her workers. And in 2014, she's going to be able to pool together with other small-business owners to shop for a better deal for her staff and for herself, just like large companies can do.

As we speak, Americans are enrolling in new programs that provide affordable coverage for folks who had been shut out of the insurance market because of preexisting conditions. People like Gail O'Brien of Keene, New Hampshire, who was diagnosed with an aggressive form of lymphoma while working full-time as a preschool teacher at a school that couldn't afford to offer insurance to its employees.

Because she was sick, no insurer would cover her. As she put it, she was scared to death, not of cancer, but how she'd pay her bills with each round of chemo that cost \$16,000. And she thought that she and her husband Matt would have to spend everything they saved to pay for their two sons' college education in order to afford treatment.

Gail was the first person in New Hampshire to sign up for the program available under the Affordable Care Act, and today she is doing great. And by 2014, no insurer will be able to discriminate against her or any one of the up to 129 million other Americans with a preexisting condition. They'll have more affordable private insurance options through State exchanges that promote competition and transparency and better deals for consumers.

Parents of children who suffer from a preexisting condition can finally breathe a sigh of relief too. Parents like Dawn Josephson of Jacksonville, Florida. Dawn is self-employed, so she buys insurance on the individual market. And her son Wesley, who I had a chance to meet—he's adorable—he has an eye condition that demands frequent surgeries.

So in the past, insurers have excluded important benefits from Dawn's plan. As her premiums soared, she called around last summer, after the Affordable Act—Affordable Care Act had taken effect, to find any plan that would cover Wesley. So she finds a company, it's offering her a reasonable rate, but out of habit, Dawn is ready for the runaround. She says, "What's not covered?" And the insurer says, "No, you're covered. Everything's covered." And

Dawn says, "I'm not being very clear here. What about my son?" And after going back and forth a few times, the insurer made it clear. He said, "No. Your son is covered. We can no longer exclude preexisting conditions for children. Wesley is covered."

Imagine what that felt like. Imagine the relief that comes with knowing that treatment for your sick child no longer has to threaten the dreams you've worked a lifetime to build for him. You're not going to have to make these heartbreaking choices.

That's happening now. Millions of young Americans can stay on their parents' plans until they turn 26. Millions of older Americans are receiving better access to preventive services and more affordable prescription drugs. We've torn down the barriers that stood between the American people and their doctors so that inside your network, you can see the primary care physician, the pediatrician, the ob-gyn of your choice, and you can use an emergency room outside your network without your insurer sticking you with extra charges.

As of last fall, every American who buys a new plan can access preventive care like mammograms, immunizations, and prenatal care to get and stay healthy for free. And all of this information about the new choices and new rights available to you is available in one simple place: healthcare.gov. You can even log on, plug in your ZIP Code, and compare prices for different insurance—private insurance plans. Right now you can do that.

And this is all before we set up the exchanges that will allow 30 million Americans to get access to care and will allow small companies to finally get the same deal that big companies get, and people being part of a big pool that gives them a better deal across the board.

Now, as important as what is happening right now is what isn't happening right now. You may have heard once or twice that this is a job-crushing—[laughter]—granny-threatening—[laughter]—budget-busting monstrosity. That's about how it's been portrayed by opponents. And that just doesn't match up to the reality. I mean this thing has been in place now for 10 months, all right?

So let's look at what's happened over the last 10 months. Not only has the economy grown and added jobs since the Affordable Care Act became law, but small businesses across the country have already chosen to offer health care to hundreds of thousands of their employees, many for the first time. That's something that regardless of politics, we should all celebrate.

Estimates from the Business Roundtable—now this isn't some left-wing organization—the Business Roundtable, the organization of all the country's largest corporations—and other experts indicate that health insurance reform could save large employers anywhere from \$2,000 to \$3,000 per family, per year, that they cover in health care costs by 2019. And that's money that businesses can use to grow and invest and to hire. That's money that workers won't have to see vanish from their paychecks or bonuses in the form of higher deductibles or bigger copayments. That's good for all of us.

And I can report that granny is safe. [Laughter] In fact, grandma's Medicare is stronger than ever. And if she was one of the millions of seniors who fell into the doughnut hole last year, she received a \$250 check, or soon will, to help her afford her medications, and a new 50 percent discount on brand-name drugs, as part of the Affordable Care Act.

Finally, because it is absolutely true that we've got to get a handle on our deficits, that the debt we are carrying right now is unsustainable if we don't start taking action, it is important for us to be clear about the truth when it comes to health care reform.

Health reform is part of deficit reform. We know that health care costs, including programs like Medicare and Medicaid, are the biggest contributors to our long-term deficit. Nobody disputes this. And this law will slow these costs. That's part of the reason why nonpartisan economists, why the Congressional Budget Office, have said that repealing this law would add a quarter of a trillion dollars to our deficit over the next decade and another trillion dollars to our deficit in the decade after that. They're not just making this up. And what's more, repeal would send middle class premiums up, would force large employers to pay that extra \$2,000 to \$3,000 per worker, and shift control of your health care right back to the insurance companies.

Now, I've repeatedly said, I believe that our system of private insurance is strong and viable, and we need it to be. It saves lives. It employs large numbers of Americans. And by the way, it's still making pretty good profits. But just as we are a people who believe in the power of the individual, the promise of the free market, we are also a people who believe, from the time of our founding, that we aspire to protect one another from harm and exploitation.

Our task has always been to seek the right balance, between the dynamism of the marketplace, but also to make sure that it's serving people. And sometimes that means removing barriers to growth by lifting rules that place unnecessary burdens on business, but other times it means enacting commonsense safeguards like these—like the Affordable Care Act—to ensure our American belief that hard work and responsibility should be rewarded by a sense of security and fair play.

That's at the heart of this reform. That's why we fought so hard for this reform. That's why we have to keep on telling people across the country about the potential of this reform and what it means for them and their families. And that's why we're not going to fall back.

I don't want to tell students that we're booting them off their parents' coverage. I don't want to tell seniors that their medicine is out of reach again. I don't want to tell Janine her taxes are going back up, or Gail that she's got to choose between keeping her home and getting well. I don't want to tell Dawn, or any other mother, that their child can't get the care that he or she needs after all.

I don't want that for America. I don't want that for our families. That's not who we are, and that's not what we stand for. We don't believe that people should have to hope against hope that they'll stay healthy or hang all their fortunes on chance. We don't believe, in a country like ours, that 1 in 10, 1 in 8 of our citizens should be that vulnerable no matter how hard they're working. We believe in something better.

So the time for fighting the battles of the last 2 years has now passed. It's time to move forward. And these efforts—strengthening our families, getting our fiscal house in order, allowing small businesses to grow, allowing entrepreneurs to strike out on their own free from crushing costs—they're critical to our economic success. And by reforming our health care system so it doesn't dictate anybody's economic fate, America can decide its own.

Now, as vital as this reform is, as committed as we are to getting our implementation right, to win the future in this new and changing world is going to require more from us. And I believe we're up to the task. I think that we can create the jobs of the future by fortifying our lead in innovation, including investing in biotechnology that can deliver new cures for crippling diseases. We can fill those jobs by guaranteeing all our children have the best skills and education possible. We can convince the businesses and industries of the 21st century to take root right here by building and deploying a new network of infrastructure.

We can bring down our deficits by taking responsibility, just as we've done in our own lives, to cut wasteful and excessive spending wherever we can find it. And we can restore our people's belief in our capacity to meet this moment by reforming our Government so it's smarter and nimbler and equal to our times.

We can do all these things. All of you believe we can do all these things, because just think back to where we were standing 4 years ago. Think of all the hard work and all the heart you put into a cause that you believed in for years—for years. And think of the feeling you had the moment your efforts finally paid off, that feeling when your faith was rewarded.

All of you are a reminder—you are proof of the fact that we are a people that can change our country for the better. And if all of us summon that spirit now, through all the hardships and the ups and downs and twists and turns, then I am absolutely convinced that our best days still lie ahead.

So I could not be prouder of you, Families USA. Thank you for your extraordinary work. Thank you, Ron. Let's keep on going. God bless you.

NOTE: The President spoke at 10:27 a.m. at the Hyatt Regency Washington on Capitol Hill. In his remarks, he referred to Ron Pollack, executive director, Families USA, who introduced the President.

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